

# NARRATIVE PLAY AS A COGNITIVE MODEL OF REALITY IN JULIO CORTÁZAR'S HOPSCOTCH

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## Abstract

This article examines narrative play as a cognitive model of reality in Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch* (*Rayuela*). Drawing on principles of cognitive narratology, conceptual metaphor theory, and reader-response approaches, the study explores how Cortázar's experimental narrative structure functions not merely as a formal innovation but as a model of human cognition and reality construction. The non-linear organization of the novel, its invitation to multiple reading paths, and its constant self-reflexivity simulate the fragmented, dynamic, and participatory nature of human experience. Narrative play in *Hopscotch* is interpreted as a cognitive strategy that mirrors processes such as meaning-making, perspective-shifting, uncertainty management, and the negotiation between order and chaos. The article argues that Cortázar's text transforms the reader from a passive recipient into an active cognitive agent, thereby modeling reality as an open system shaped by choice, interpretation, and play.

**Keywords:** Narrative play, cognitive model, reality construction, cognitive narratology, Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*, non-linear narrative, reader participation.

## Introduction

The concept of narrative play occupies a central position in the poetics of twentieth-century experimental literature, where the boundaries between author, text, and reader are deliberately destabilized. In this context, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* stands as one of the most influential literary experiments of the Latin American Boom, offering not only a novel but a model of how reality itself can be perceived, structured, and understood. Narrative play in *Hopscotch* operates as a cognitive mechanism that reflects the ways in which human consciousness

engages with a fragmented, uncertain, and plural world. Rather than presenting a fixed representation of reality, Cortázar constructs a dynamic system in which reality emerges through interaction, choice, and interpretive movement. This approach aligns with cognitive theories that view meaning not as a static entity but as an emergent process shaped by perception, memory, and imagination.

At the most immediate level, *Hopscotch* proposes a playful challenge to conventional reading practices. The reader is invited to choose between different reading sequences, either following a linear path or jumping across chapters according to a prescribed but unconventional order. This structural play is not a mere gimmick; it reflects a deeper cognitive principle. Human experience rarely unfolds in a strictly linear fashion. Memories interrupt the present, expectations shape perception, and meanings are constantly revised. By allowing multiple trajectories through the text, Cortázar externalizes these mental processes, transforming the act of reading into a simulation of cognitive navigation through reality. The novel thus becomes a space where reading mirrors thinking, and narrative structure parallels mental structure.

From a cognitive perspective, narrative play in *Hopscotch* can be understood as a model of distributed attention and fragmented consciousness. The protagonist Horacio Oliveira is characterized by a persistent sense of existential dissatisfaction and intellectual restlessness. His consciousness moves erratically between philosophical reflection, emotional attachment, irony, and detachment. This oscillation is mirrored in the narrative form, which resists closure and coherence. The reader's effort to assemble meaning from disjointed episodes resembles the cognitive effort required to make sense of lived experience. Reality, in this model, is not given but constructed through continuous mental activity, negotiation, and revision.

The metaphor of play itself is crucial for understanding the cognitive dimension of Cortázar's narrative strategy. Play implies freedom, experimentation, and the temporary suspension of rigid rules, while still operating within a framework that gives actions meaning. In *Hopscotch*, narrative play establishes a space where reality can be tested rather than affirmed. The hopscotch game, evoked in the title, symbolizes a childlike yet profound attempt to reach an imagined center or transcendence by moving through numbered squares. Cognitively, this movement represents the human desire to impose order on chaos, to move toward meaning while accepting uncertainty and failure as integral parts of the process. The

reader, like the player, must decide where to step next, knowing that no final square guarantees absolute truth.

Narrative play also functions as a mechanism of perspective-shifting, a key cognitive operation. The novel constantly changes focalization, tone, and discursive mode, incorporating philosophical essays, fragments, dialogues, and metafictional commentary. This multiplicity of voices prevents the stabilization of a single authoritative perspective. From a cognitive standpoint, such perspectival instability encourages the reader to engage in theory of mind processes, attributing intentions, beliefs, and emotions to different narrative agents. Reality thus appears as a network of partial viewpoints rather than a unified whole. Cortázar's narrative play trains the reader to tolerate ambiguity and to recognize the coexistence of incompatible interpretations, reflecting the pluralistic nature of modern consciousness.

Another essential aspect of narrative play in *Hopscotch* is its emphasis on self-reflexivity. The novel repeatedly draws attention to its own constructedness, questioning the very possibility of representing reality through language. This metafictional dimension has a significant cognitive implication. By foregrounding the limitations of narrative representation, Cortázar encourages the reader to become aware of the mental schemas and interpretive frames through which reality is perceived. Cognitive linguistics suggests that humans rely on conceptual models and metaphors to structure experience. *Hopscotch* exposes these models by destabilizing them, revealing reality as a product of linguistic and cognitive mediation rather than an objective given.

The relationship between narrative play and time further illustrates the novel's function as a cognitive model. Chronological order is disrupted, and temporal continuity is replaced by associative logic. Past, present, and hypothetical futures coexist within the narrative space. This temporal play reflects the workings of human memory, which is non-linear and reconstructive. Cognitive psychology has shown that remembering is an active process involving selection, interpretation, and imagination. In *Hopscotch*, time behaves according to similar principles, reinforcing the idea that narrative reality is shaped by cognitive processes rather than by objective chronology.

The role of the reader in this cognitive model cannot be overstated. Cortázar explicitly assigns responsibility to the reader, who must choose how to engage with the text and how to assemble its fragments into a meaningful whole. This

participatory model aligns with reader-response theory and cognitive approaches that emphasize the active role of the mind in meaning construction. Reading Hopscotch becomes an act of cognitive play, where hypotheses are formed, tested, and sometimes abandoned. The reader's frustration, pleasure, and confusion are not byproducts but essential components of the experience, mirroring the emotional and cognitive dimensions of real-life decision-making. Narrative play in Hopscotch also reflects a broader epistemological stance. The novel resists totalizing explanations and rejects the notion of a single, coherent worldview. Instead, it presents reality as an open system characterized by contingency and multiplicity. From a cognitive perspective, this openness corresponds to the adaptive nature of human cognition, which must operate under conditions of uncertainty. The playful structure of the novel encourages flexibility, creativity, and openness to alternative interpretations, modeling a way of engaging with Language itself becomes a field of play in Cortázar's text. Word games, neologisms, and shifts between registers disrupt linguistic automatism and force the reader to reconsider habitual patterns of understanding. Cognitive linguistics emphasizes that language shapes thought, and by destabilizing language, Hopscotch destabilizes thought itself. This linguistic play challenges entrenched conceptual categories, allowing new associations and meanings to emerge. Reality, in this sense, is shown to be inseparable from the linguistic and cognitive tools used to describe it.

The cognitive model of reality proposed by Hopscotch is ultimately relational rather than hierarchical. Meaning arises not from a central authority but from the interaction between textual elements, reader cognition, and cultural context. Narrative play functions as a mediator in this process, enabling constant movement between order and disorder, structure and freedom. The novel suggests that reality is not something to be discovered but something to be played with, negotiated, and continually reimagined.

In conclusion, narrative play in Julio Cortázar's Hopscotch operates as a sophisticated cognitive model of reality. Through its non-linear structure, reader participation, perspectival multiplicity, and linguistic experimentation, the novel simulates fundamental processes of human cognition, including meaning-making, memory, attention, and interpretation. Cortázar's narrative play does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs a model that invites the reader to experience reality as dynamic, fragmented, and open-ended. By transforming

reading into a form of cognitive play, Hopscotch offers not only a literary innovation but also a profound insight into the ways humans perceive, understand, and inhabit their world.

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